What's behind our arguments about immigration?

When we talk about the immigration rate, we're really talking about our most fundamental fears and beliefs.

From the Editors in the [February 28, 2018](#) issue

The U.S.-Mexico border. Thinkstock.

Each year the United States admits a little over 1 million immigrants. Is that too many? President Trump and some members of Congress say it is, and some polls suggest that almost half of Americans agree. So besides wanting to crack down on illegal immigration, President Trump is calling for reducing legal immigration by cutting back on family reunifications, so-called chain migration. He claims that under the current system "a single immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives."

The notion of "virtually unlimited" migration is largely a specter of Trump's making. Family members are not automatically allowed to join a relative in the United States. The system gives preference to spouses and minor children but limits how many

married children and siblings are allowed to immigrate. That's why there's a backlog of applications; the wait in some cases is up to 20 years.

Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains: Is the current immigration rate too high? If so, what would be the optimal number? Half a million a year? Zero? And what's the basis for that judgment?

The stated objections to immigration are often that immigrants take jobs away from native-born Americans, that they put a strain on government services and the economy, that they increase crime, and that they overturn the norms of American culture.

These concerns deserve to be considered—yet in each case there is ample evidence that they aren't valid. Immigrants' overall impact on the job market is negligible: some native workers are adversely affected by competition for jobs, but others benefit from the new businesses and markets that immigrants create. Because immigrants tend to be young, they bolster productivity in an aging nation.

As for burdening government services, immigrants can't access welfare programs for several years, and in the meantime they pay taxes that support those programs. As for crime—a worry President Trump has voiced repeatedly, and did again in his State of the Union address—immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans. As for worries about failure to assimilate, immigrants today are as eager as previous generations to learn English, invest in their communities, and participate in American institutions. The case can be made, then, that the current rate of immigration is a net gain for the nation.

However, people's views on immigration may not be connected to data-based assessment of costs and benefits. They may be rooted in a general uneasiness about cultural change and the challenge of living beside people who are different. Those feelings are understandable. But they do not necessarily make for wise public policy.

The debate on reducing immigration is an opportunity for us to ask ourselves what we think is the optimal immigration rate and why. Is there any kind of evidence that might make us alter our view? Being honest with ourselves would help us face our concerns constructively. And it would help us in the work of formulating policy that best serves the welfare of citizens and immigrants.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Too many immigrants?"